NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, *238 William St., N. Y.*

No. 377. *Price, Five Cents.*

THE LAST OF THE SEVEN

OR THE CONFESSIONS OF DAZAAR

Then, having drawn them there, she still held the arm firmly in her grasp, while she raised her eyes slowly to his, and in a low tone she said to him: "Watch the figures I have made on your arm, and tell me when they are dry."

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No. 377. NEW YORK, March 19, 1904. Price Five Cents.

THE LAST OF THE SEVEN;

OR,

The Confessions of Dazaar.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE MURDER OF THOMAS CHELSEA—AND THE WARNING.

"The inspector is waiting to see you, sir."

It was Patsy who delivered this message to his chief, who was at the moment engaged in looking through the evening papers, the Friday evening following upon the events described in the preceding number of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY; that is to say, it was just a week to a day after the capture of Dazaar in the back cellar where the clique of Devil Worshipers had held their meeting.

The detective was enjoying that rare episode in his busy life, that of spending an evening at home, and he was visibly annoyed when Patsy made the announcement by his own fireside.

However, he made no comment other than to excuse himself from Ethel and a moment later he was shaking hands with the chief of the detective bureau in the library.

"Take a seat, inspector, and help yourself to a cigar," he said. "Even if you are in a hurry, as you always are when you come here, let us make haste slowly. Something has happened that is out of the ordinary, I suppose."

"Something has happened, of course, but really, I don't suppose I should class it as out of the ordinary, for nothing is out of the ordinary in our business, is it?"

"Oh, I don't know. Some things are."

"Well, this time, Nick, it seems on the face of it to be entirely ordinary, if a murder can ever be classed as ordinary."

"A murder, eh?"

"Yes. A man whom you know. That is why I have come to you before going to the scene of the crime.

I have telephoned to keep everything undisturbed till we arrive, for I thought you would like to be on the spot with me when I began the investigation."

"A man I know, eh? I wonder if I can guess who it is."

"Try."

"Chelsea."

"Correct; but what made you guess his name the first thing?"

"Call it intuition, and let it go at that. Our friend Dazaar hasn't escaped yet, has she?"

"Not unless she has accomplished it within the last fifteen minutes. It is just about that length of time since I telephoned to know if she was all right."

"Which means that as soon as you heard of this new crime you connected her with it, eh?"

"No; it doesn't mean that; but it does mean that as soon as I heard of this latest murder of a person who had been associated with her, I thought I would make sure that she was where we wanted her to be."

"I see; well, you must have had another reason, also."

"So I did. Chelsea was stabbed."

"Ah! Killed by one of the Dazaar daggers?"

"I haven't seen it yet, but the description over the phone seems to tally."

"Even so, there is nothing wonderful in that. You see, inspector, even though we rounded up and put into prison, twelve of the followers of Dazaar beside the arch fiend herself, it does not follow that we have captured all of her following. In fact, I have often thought that there are, perhaps, more of them at liberty still, than we have succeeded in putting behind the bars. In fact, I have thought that by keeping quiet as we have done, the others would show a hand somewhere before long, but I hardly expected it to make its appearance through a murder."

"How, then?"

"Well, I rather expected that they would betray their existence through some effort to liberate Dazaar."

"You still believe that Irma Plavatski and Dazaar are one and the same?"

"I am sure of it. But let us get back to the matter in hand. What do you know about the death of Chelsea?"

"Nothing, only that he is dead—fully dressed—evening dress, mind you—sitting in his chair near a window in his room with the dagger up to the hilt through the very center of the bosom of his shirt. That is all I know so far."

"When was he discovered?"

"Half an hour ago."

"I'm afraid the coroner will get there before we do."

"I have already been in communication with him, Nick. He will meet us there and will make no investigation until our arrival."

"Good. How long had Chelsea been dead, when he was found, do they think?"

"More than an hour, certainly. His man had been in the adjoining room all that time."

"He had apartments at the Drury Arms, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, let us go at once. It is nine o'clock now. You have been here fifteen minutes; he was discovered half an hour before that, and had been dead more than an hour then, so we must conclude that he put on his dress suit as early as seven o'clock, at least. Excuse me one moment, and I will be with you."

Returning to the room where he had left his wife, Nick found Patsy still there. Ten-Ichi, relieved temporarily from duty, had gone out early in the evening and had not yet returned.

"Patsy," said the detective, "the man whom we knew as Thomas Chelsea has been found murdered in his rooms at the Drury Arms. It is, perhaps, the work of some of the followers of Dazaar, although that is merely a surmise. The inspector is downstairs, and I am going with him to investigate the matter. I want you to remain here in the house with Mrs. Carter until I return, and when Ten-Ichi comes, you are to give him the same directions. Neither of you are to leave the house till I return, and if I should happen to be away longer than I expect to be, one of you must be awake and on the watch all the time. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Very good." Then he turned to his wife and added:

"Now, Ethel, I have some orders for you."

She smiled up at him with a pretty shrug of her shoulders, and for a moment her embroidery needle was suspended in the air while she interrogated him with her matchless eyes.

"I am never superstitious, as you well know, my dear," he said, "but all day I have had a hunch, as Patsy would say, that something is going to happen. Well, something has happened, and it is rather in line with what I have been expecting."

"You don't mean that you expected to hear of the murder of Thomas Chelsea, do you?"

"Not exactly that, although it does not surprise me. I said it is in line with what I have been expecting, which means that feeling assured that Dazaar's followers are not all captured—in fact, that we only captured the scum of them in the Thibetans, and that the very worst of them are still at large—I have been looking for a move on their part for the last two days. Now they have made it."

"Well?"

"The 'hunch' that I referred to is the constant recurrence in my mind of the warning that Irma Plavatski gave me when I captured her. She called it a prophesy, but no matter by what name one chooses to call it, I have thought of it many times to-day, and while I do not, of course, anticipate any danger to you here in your own home, I do not propose to permit anything to occur through my carelessness."

"And so you have orders to give me?" said Ethel.

"Yes."

"What are they?"

"In all probability I will be back here within two or three hours—perhaps sooner; but we both know that I am often detained. I don't want you to go out of the house again, whether I am here or not, without my express permission. The point is this, my dear. I am perfectly satisfied that one or more—perhaps many of Irma Plavatski's adherents, have not been captured. We have got Irma in the toils where I do not think she can escape. I believe they have also given up hope that she can escape. If that is true, they will stop at nothing to work their revenge upon me, and the very first thing they will attempt will be to do injury to you. You will obey me?"

"Of course, Nick."

"And permit nothing to call you out?"

"Certainly not."

"Remember, they are as crafty as the devil himself."

"I'll not forget."

"I am satisfied that the death of Chelsea is due to them. As long as they remained quiet and silent, nothing could be done, but now that they have shown their hand again, it won't be very long before we have all that is left of them. Until we have rounded up what remains, I am determined that you shall run no risks."

When the detective and the inspector were in the act of leaving the house together, Nick turned to his companion and asked:

"How would you define the word 'premonition'?"

"By calling it indigestion," replied the inspector.

"Good; so would I."

"Have you had an attack of premonition, Nick?"

"No; but I have received another warning that Dazaar might have written did we not know where she is, and what she is doing; but for the sake of keeping my wife safely at home, I have led her to suppose that it has come to me in the shape of a premonition. Here it is. Read it."

He took a scrap of paper from his pocket and passed it to the inspector, who read aloud:

"Nick Carter will recall the prophesy that was made to him in the presence of the Devil Wirshipers. Although he believes that Dazaar is beyond the power to do him harm, he will find that prison walls do not limit Dazaar's influence. Beware, Carter! One event will happen this very night, and others will follow in quick succession—Beware."

"That came at four o'clock," said Nick, "so you see why I was not surprised by the information you brought, for as you will observe, that note may account for a premonition which does not come from indigestion; eh, inspector?"

CHAPTER II.

THE SIZE OF THE PROPOSITION.

When Nick Carter and the inspector arrived at the apartment house known as Drury Arms, they were conducted without delay to the four-room apartment that had been occupied by Thomas Chelsea during the three or four months that he had been a resident of New York City.

The house itself was not unlike many others of its kind situated in the fashionable section of the city, with the possible exception that it was rather more elegant, and, therefore, a more expensive place of residence than its neighbors.

As a place of residence it was much affected by rich bachelors, although it was not confined exclusively to that class; but it had afforded precisely the sort of home he most desired, for Thomas Chelsea, who had graduated from Yale to a ranch in the Southwest, had prospered so well that while still a young man he had been able to retire with an ample fortune.

The four rooms he had occupied were thoroughly indicative of the character of the man. The walls were decorated with every conceivable suggestion of his life on the ranch, and no matter in what direction one turned in examining the rooms, there were evidences on every hand of the perfectly free-and-easy, happy-go-lucky and generous character of the man.

He had lived there with one servant, who acted as much in the capacity of companion as valet and attendant, for they had passed years together on the plains, and only the difference of fortune and education prevented them from entire and thorough companionship. Of the affection that had existed between them, there could be no doubt.

The body of Chelsea had, of course, been left undisturbed until the arrival of the coroner, the inspector and Nick Carter, for even Buck Granger, as the attendant upon Chelsea was called, had realized the importance of placing no impediment in the way of the officers of the law.

He was cool and collected, and intent, too, and Nick regarded him with a great deal of interest, for he understood at once that here was a man who had been accustomed all his life to rough and ready living, and to carrying his fate upon the sleeve of his coat for any incident to brush against and disturb. It was not the first time that he had encountered sudden and violent death; nor was it the only time when a dear friend had proved to be the victim of such a disaster, and, therefore, although Nick could see that he suffered more poignantly than he permitted to appear, he, nevertheless, suffered deeply and truly over the death of his friend.

There was a cold, steely glitter in his eyes, and a compression about his lips, too, that boded ill for the owner of the hand that had wrought that deed of death, if ever he should discover him; but he was calm and assured, and he told what he knew about the circumstances with a calm straightforwardness that demonstrated his sincerity and truth.

"I always called him Tom when we were alone, and I'm going to do it now, if you don't mind," he said, to Nick. "I reckon I can tell my story straighter if I'm not bothered by trying to remember cityfied conventionalities. You, I take it, Mr. Carter, are the man who played the trick on him last week, when you gave him a chair to sit in, something to drink, and smoke, and read, while you went out to keep an appointment that he intended to keep himself."

"Yes; I am the man," replied Nick.

"Well, I want to say right here, that he thought a lot of you. He said that was the slickest job that was ever put up on him."

"Come down to-day, Buck," said Nick. "We can go into the other things, later on."

"Yes, sir, I know that. But you see, I'm sorter getting my wind, so to speak. I reckon that maybe you can understand it when I tell you that I feel uncommon knocked out by this business. Tom and I have hooked up together for about fourteen years, and, although I had good reason to expect that one of us would get it where neither of us wanted it, one of these days, all the same I wasn't just exactly what you might call prepared for it when it struck; see? I reckon you never are. Leastwise, I know that this thing has caught me in the wind, for fair. It's made me gasp; see? Suppose you ask me a few questions, Mr. Carter. I reckon

that somehow I can get at the right end of what you want to know, a little handier in that way. I ain't much on giving out a line of talk."

"When did you last see Mr. Chelsea——"

"Say, would you mind calling him Tom while you're talking to me?"

"No. Not at all. When did you last see Tom alive?"

"At six o'clock."

"Where?"

"Right here where we're standing. In this room."

"Was he dressed, then?"

"He was dressed, yes, sir, but not in the rig he's got on now."

"Then he changed his dress after you left him."

"He did."

"Well, why did you leave him? Where did you go?"

"We discovered that the cigar box was empty. There was just one apiece, and so I told him that while he was getting into his togs, I'd just mosey down to the store where we always bought the kind he liked, and get a fresh box. That's how I happened to leave him, and that's where I went."

"And you each lighted your cigars, eh? What did he say when you went out?"

"He said he'd smoke his cigar and then he'd dress, and that he'd probably stretch out on the bed and take a short snooze afterward, so that——"

"Do you mean that he would take his nap after he dressed?"

"Sure. He didn't have much sleep last night. We're used to sleeping in the saddle, or anywhere, and the mere fact of his having his evening clothes on wouldn't fease him in the least if he happened to want a wink of sleep. Besides, if he did it in that way, he could sleep till the last minute before he went out, don't you see?"

"Yes, I see. You were never in the habit of helping him dress, were you?"

"Well, he wasn't no kid in swaddlers. I reckon he could dress himself. He always did it since I have known him, and there wasn't any good reason for his forgetting how as I can see."

"He lighted his cigar and you lighted yours, and then you went out; is that it?"

"That's it."

"What did he say to you?"

"That he'd smoke, dress and take a snooze; that he didn't have to go out till a quarter past eight, and that if I returned and found the door of his room closed, to let him sleep till that time."

"Then you went after the cigars?"

"Precisely."

"Did you get them?"

"Sure."

"What time did you return?"

"At a quarter past seven."

"And found the door of his room closed?"

"Just as you see it now."

"So that naturally you believed that he was sleeping?"

"Sure."

"And you waited till a quarter past eight before you opened it?"

"I did."

"What did you do then?"

"Partner, I can't rightly tell you what I did do, but I reckon that I didn't do anything but just stand there in the doorway and stare at him for a minute or two, for I could see at a glance that he was dead, and what killed him."

"And then?"

"Well, I crossed the room and got down on my knees in front of him. I felt of his hands, and while they weren't cold, exactly, they were beginning to be, see? I knew he was as dead as a quartered steer. There wasn't any getting around that fact, and I figured that if I didn't do much fooling around him, maybe you'd be better able to tell who had chucked the knife into his in'ards."

"Do you mean that I would be better able to tell?"

"That's what I said."

"What made you think of me?"

"We'd talked about you a good deal. He thought you were a Jim Dandy. He used to say that a Jim Dandy was a feller who could pick flies off of the ceil-

ing with boxing gloves on, and whenever Tom said that anybody was a Jim Dandy, you can put it down in big, black letters that that particular individual was it, in his opinion. So, don't you see, I quite naturally thought of you, first thing?"

"I see. Well, what then?"

"Well, I touched his forehead and that sorter brought me too, I reckon, for I got out my gun and made a tour of the premises just to make sure that there wasn't anybody here, and then I locked the door of the room where he was, and is now, put the key in my pocket so that nobody could get in there without my say-so, and then I asked for police headquarters over the telephone, told the feller, that answered me, all about it, and said he would do me a great favor if he would ask Mr. Nick Carter to come here as quick as forked lightning."

"And then?"

"Then I sat down in a chair over there by the window and smoked and waited, and after a while two police officers came and said they were sent from headquarters and that the inspector and you would be here in a jiffy. They didn't ask for the key to that room, and they wouldn't have got it if they did. Maybe they knew that."

"Maybe they did," assented Nick. "Of course you haven't any idea who killed your friend, have you?"

"Not unless it was one of that crowd he was going to see the other night."

"Was the door locked when you returned with the cigars?"

"Yes. It was always locked; just the regular latch lock, you know."

"Did you discover any sign, then or since then, that any other person had been here?"

"Narry a sign, and I looked for 'em, too."

"But somebody had been here, Buck, and he left a sign behind him, too."

"I reckon any fool could tell that now, sir, begging your pardon. He left a sign that I won't soon forget."

"Ay, but he left more than one sign—something besides the dagger."

"Did he? What was it?"

Nick stepped across the floor to the mantle and took from it a cigar that had evidently only been lighted to be put aside again, showing that not more than two or three draughts had been made upon it.

"This," he said, holding it in his outstretched hand.

"That might have been put there by Tom," said Buck Granger.

"It might have been, but it wasn't. By your own admission he smoked more than that on the cigar he lighted before you went out. In fact, he smoked that cigar almost to a finish, if the ashes on the table are any evidence at all. Furthermore, if you will look closely, you will see that while this cigar is considerably like those in the box, from which you have taken only one, it is not the same make or pattern. But, Buck, there is still another and a better reason for my statement."

"What is that, sir?"

"While Tom Chelsea was an involuntary guest at my house once on a time, he smoked a number of my cigars, and he left a very pretty arrangement of butts on the ash-receiver in my room. When I looked at them after he had gone, I found that they were all marked alike, and concluded that he rarely took his cigar from his mouth while smoking."

"You're right about that, sure."

"On every cigar that Tom Chelsea smoked in my house, the mark of his eyetooth was always directly in the center of the portion he held in his mouth, and almost through it. This cigar isn't marked so, is it?"

"Not on your life it ain't."

"Then Tom Chelsea didn't smoke it, did he?"

"Not by a long shot!"

"Very well, Buck; then it is up to us to find out who did, isn't it?"

"That, Mr. Carter, strikes me as being just about the size of the present proposition."

CHAPTER III.

WHAT BUCK GRANGER KNEW AND DIDN'T TELL.

The corpse of Tom Chelsea was seated in a leather covered chair near the window in his sleeping room, and the position was as natural as it could have been

had he thrown himself down there, idly, for a moment's rest, or to take the nap he had intended to do.

The chair itself was in a corner of the room, and was at an angle so that it exactly faced the closed door which communicated with the room where the conversation between Nick and Buck Granger took place.

The bed had not been disturbed save that there was one indentation at the side of it which indicated that Chelsea had for a moment seated himself there, doubtless to tie his shoes, or while he adjusted some part of his dress.

There was not an indication anywhere that the room had been entered at all by any person other than himself.

The men who operated the elevators in the building could not recall having brought any person to that floor of the house at all during the hour while Buck Granger was absent, and not one of them remembered any especial person other than regular guests of the house, as having been taken to any other floor during that time.

In short, exhaustive inquiry throughout the building, of the employees and guests, developed nothing upon which the most remote theory could be fastened, and it was evident that the murderer had calculated so well that he had succeeded thoroughly in avoiding any observation that could be traced to him.

Yet he had been there, he had done his work, and he had gone away.

Not only that, but he had taken his time, as if he were confident that he would not be disturbed, and this fact demonstrated that he either knew the destination of Buck Granger's errand, or had provided some means of being warned of his approach upon returning.

The knife with which Chelsea was slain afforded the only clew, if clew it could be called, since it was an exact counterpart of the weapons which Dazaar and Dazaar's followers were so expert in using. But Dazaar, if, indeed, Irma Plavatski were Dazaar, was safely behind prison bars.

"Buck," said the detective, when he emerged from the room of death with the inspector at his side, "has it occurred to you that nine men out of ten would accuse you of having committed this crime?"

Buck Granger raised his strong head and looked Nick squarely in the eyes, as he replied:

"Well, in that case, all I have to say is that nine men out of ten are infernal fools!"

"Perhaps; but the fact remains that a strong case of circumstantial evidence could be made against you. Can you throw a knife?"

"Not very well; I can shoot some, though," he replied, with meaning.

Nick smiled.

"You won't be called upon to shoot, neither will you be asked to defend yourself against an accusation of murder; but——"

Nick paused and looked the man straight in the face, and then, very slowly, added:

"But, I think you know a lot that you haven't told me."

"What in thunder do you mean by that, sir?"

"I mean that you haven't told me all that you know, because you haven't thought of it, or, if you have, you haven't thought it worth telling; not that you are purposely keeping anything back. Do you understand that?"

"Yes. That sounds better. I thought for a minute——"

"Never mind what you thought. Sit down, Buck, and listen to me. Sit down, gentlemen, and let me have the floor for a few minutes. Now, Buck, I am going to address my remarks directly at you. If I say things which you think are not true, you must stop me and correct me; when I say things that are true, you must nod your head, or otherwise signify that I am on the right track, for I am going to build up a history of what has occurred in this room, and as I am going to build it upon what I have seen and heard during the few moments I have been here, it may be that I will make mistakes, but also that I will come so near to the actual truth that your memory will be refreshed. Do you understand that?"

"I think I do. You mean that you are going to guess the riddle out."

"No, Buck, it isn't guesswork; it is putting two and two together. For instance, when did you last take the things off of that mantle to dust it?"

"Let me think. Was it yesterday morning? No, it was in the afternoon of the day before yesterday."

"Were you at home—I mean in this room—during the evening after you did clear it off and dust it?"

"I was; every blessed minute."

"Where was Tom?"

"Night before last? He was here, too. We sat here and chinned and smoked till midnight."

"Anybody call?"

"No."

"Last night you have said that he was out late."

"Yes. Almost all night."

"Did you go out, too?"

"No; I stayed right here.'

"All the time?"

"I didn't go out of the room."

"Anybody call then?"

"No."

"Well, that brings me down to a point I wish to make. Now, try to remember, please: Did not a man—a gentleman, we will say—call here during the day, perhaps the forenoon of the day before yesterday? Wait, before you answer. When I asked you when you dusted the mantle last, you began to say that you did it yesterday morning, and then you remembered that for some reason you deferred it, which showed that you have been in the habit of doing it in the morning, and that for separate reasons you have missed three mornings. I am not interested in the first time you missed it because you have cleaned the mantle since that time, that is in the afternoon of the day before yesterday. This morning, we will say that you missed it because your master had been out late the night before, and you thought you might disturb him——"

Buck nodded his head vehemently.

"And yesterday morning you missed it again, because you had cleaned it only the afternoon before, and, therefore, it did not really need it."

Again Buck nodded his head vehemently.

"So it remains that you did not clean it on the morning of the day before yesterday, because you were interrupted, or the room was occupied at the time you would usually have performed that duty. That you did clean it that same afternoon shows that you were alone in the room; so, now we come down to the question. Who called here to see your master during the early part of the forenoon of the day before yesterday?"

"Well, I'm teetotally blowed, I am!" exclaimed Buck.

"Why?" asked Nick, smiling.

"Because, while you didn't know anything about it, you remembered it, and I, who did know all about it, forgot it."

"Well, who called?"

"A chap with a Mexican name, or a Spanish name, I suppose it's the same thing."

"For our purposes, yes. What was his name?"

"Cortez."

Nick turned to the inspector.

"Were getting warm," he said. "The man who killed himself in the cell at police headquarters a week ago, and who we at one time believed to be Dazaar, was only a dummy after all and was not even the same one who has played the part of Cortez before. Now, Buck, did you stay in the room at all while that man was here?"

"Only a minute."

"Mr. Chelsea gave him a cigar; did you pass the box to him?"

"Yes; but how in thunder you know it? Is a rope on me?"

Nick reached one hand behind a large photograph that stood upon the mantle and drew forth a cigar, half smoked.

"Here is the cigar he took from the box when you passed it to him, Buck," he said. "Do you see it? Do you see the marks of his teeth upon it? They are the same as the marks upon this one, are they not? And, if they are, does it not follow that the same man used both? Buck Granger, the man to whom you gave that cigar, is the man who killed Tom Chelsea. Don't you think you knew more about this business than you told us at first?"

CHAPTER IV.

"BULLY FOR YOU, CARTER! BULLY FOR YOU!"

Buck Granger could only stare at the detective in undisguised amazement, for the process of deduction by which Nick had arrived at the conclusion he developed, was utterly beyond his comprehension.

"Well, Mr. Carter," he said, when he had somewhat recovered from his surprise, "you can have my saddle and blanket. My hands are up in the air and my hat is off to you, sir, and don't you forget it. Tom Chelsea used to say, after that night when you corraled him and took the trail in his place, that you were a whole outfit by your own lonesome, and Tom wasn't a chap what would mistake a dicky-bird for a mountain lion. I'm under your orders from this here blessed minute till you fire me, and you'll find that that ain't no idle jest."

"Thank you, Buck. I think I understand you, and I'll accept your services. Now, let's get down to business."

"Ready, sir."

"What time did Cortez come here?"

"Som'ers about eleven in the forenoon, the day before yesterday."

"Did you admit him?"

"I did."

"Where was Tom?"

"Sitting in that chair near the window, smoking and reading the morning paper."

"Did he seem to know Cortez?"

"Yes, and no. He didn't know him by sight, but when the stranger mentioned a name to him it was all pleasant on the instant. Tom got out of his chair, asked his nibs to take a seat, told me to give him a cigar, and acted as if the chap was a long-lost brother."

"The name he mentioned belonged to a woman, didn't it?"

"Sure thing."

"And it was foreign, eh? Russian, in fact?"

"Russion or Polish."

"Plavatski, wasn't it?"

"I say, would you mind telling me what is the use in asking me all these questions if you know the answers beforehand?"

"Because I don't know all of them, and, perhaps, I do not know any of them for a dead certainty, as you would say, until you corroborate me."

"All right, sir, what next?"

"Did you hear any more that passed between them?"

"Only this much, sir. Cortez told Tom that he had brought him a letter from Irma Plavatski, and added that he wanted to be alone with Tom before he gave it to him. I didn't wait for any more, then, but moseyed out of the room."

"And was that the last you heard or saw of him?"

"It was for a fact. I didn't even see him when he went away, for I had an errand outside. I was gone half an hour, and when I returned the man had gone."

"What did Mr. Chelsea have to say about him?"

"Not a word, and I didn't ask any questions."

"Do you know what became of the letter that Cortez brought?"

"Yes. Tom burned it."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he had it in his hand when I came back, and while I was in the room he read it through again. Then he tore it into little bits and chucked the pieces into the fire."

"How do you know it was the letter?"

"Because the part with the signature laid on top when the fragments dropped on the coals, and I could read 'Faithfully yours, Irma Plavatski' on it as plain as day."

"Did Tom never refer to the incident after that?"

"Only once."

"When was that?"

"Just before I went out after the cigars to-night—just before he was killed."

"What did he say then, Buck?"

"He said this: 'If that Greaser chap, Cortez, should ever call here again when I'm not at home, Buck, chuck him into the street,' and when I made no reply, he waited a minute and added: 'I reckon we'll call on my friend, Carter, to-morrow and give him a pointer or two.' "

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. Tom had a way of knowing his own

business and not wanting anybody to interfere with it till he was asked."

Nick turned to the inspector.

"It seems quite plain," he said, "that this man who called himself Cortez came to the door and was admitted to these rooms by Chelsea himself, soon after Buck started out after the cigars."

"I don't see it quite that way," ventured the coroner, who had been an attentive listener, "for the reason that if that were so, the murdered man would not have been asleep in his chair when he was killed. He would have been in this room where he received the man who called upon him."

"That is well reasoned as far as it goes," replied Nick; "only it doesn't go far enough for the facts. You must remember that Tom Chelsea was a man who could not easily be caught off his guard."

"Bet your life on that!" put in Buck.

"If his caller had made any attempt to do away with him while Chelsea's eyes were wide open, he would have found his man as quick and as ready as he was himself, and no matter how quick Cortez might be in throwing a knife, I doubt if he could have made a motion to throw one, standing face to face with Chelsea, that would not have been dodged sufficiently, so that Chelsea would have got back at him somehow."

"Sure as shootin'!" commented Buck, in an aside.

"The fact is," continued Nick, "that when Chelsea was killed, he believed himself to be alone in these rooms, and he probably was alone. He doubtless changed his clothes after his caller had taken his departure. Then he went into the next room, dropped into the chair, and composed himself for a nap till Buck's return, and, that he did fall asleep."

"Then how——" began the coroner, but Nick interrupted him.

"Wait," he said. "I think I can tell you exactly how it happened. "Cortez saw Buck go out of the house. He had probably been awaiting that very opportunity. He immediately applied at the door and was admitted upon a real, or a pretended, errand from Irma Plavatski, for Tom Chelsea was very much attracted by her beauty. They talked together for a few moments, after which Cortez went out again, but in leaving the room he managed to spring the latch of the door so that it could be opened from the outside without the aid of a key. In all probability Chelsea had mentioned the fact that he intended to sleep a few minutes before Buck's return. Cortez knew his man well enough to know that it was not a safe proposition to attack him while he had his wits about him, and so he figured upon returning while he was sleeping. We will say that he went out, but that he did not leave the building. In fact, that he doubtless lingered about the halls until sufficient time had elapsed so he could figure that Chelsea was asleep. Can't you see the rest?"

"Give us your own version of what remains," said the inspector.

"It is very simple. When he thought the time was ripe, he opened the door softly. He discovered that this room was empty and that the door was closed between it and the one adjoining. He came in here and waited a little while longer, listening, no doubt, with his trained ears against the door of the bedroom. When he was satisfied that Chelsea was sleeping, he opened that as softly as he did the other one."

"That point right there is what puzzles me," broke in Buck, "and this is the reason. Tom was the lightest sleeper you ever saw. A fly crawling on a blanket would wake him, almost, and that door squeaks."

"Nevertheless," continued Nick, "he opened the door without awakening Chelsea. Everybody who has tried the act knows that the most squeaky door in the world can be opened silently if it is done slowly enough and with the proper pressure. All that is required, is patience. Anyhow, he did open that one far enough to permit him to throw the knife. Chelsea was asleep in the chair, facing the door. The broad expanse of white shirt bosom offered a splendid target. The diamond blazing in the center, served as a bull's-eye. He threw the knife, and it went true to its mark. Tom Chelsea never moved after it struck him."

For a moment after Nick ceased speaking, the silence in the room remained unbroken, and then they were all startled by a resounding, gasping sob, followed by a hearty oath which cannot be repeated here, and they

all turned toward Buck Granger in the utmost astonishment to discover that he had turned his back upon them and crossed to the window where he stood for a full minute, looking out upon the lights of the city streets.

Presently he turned and faced them.

"Partner," he said, addressing Nick and ignoring the others—and his face was white and drawn with suffering, "I reckon you needn't set me down as a cry-baby just because I made this break, will you? You see, I loved Tom Chelsea better'n most men love, I reckon, and that Greaser's knife hurt me a whole lot worse than it did him. I'm not showing any white feather, as I know of, only when you, Mr. Carter, told just how that thing was done, and I thought how I'd have liked to step into this room just about that minute, it sort of ketched me before I knew it. I won't make any threats, Mr. Carter, but if you'll help me to find the man that chucked that knife into Tom, I'll engage to give you a correct imitation of a Greaser getting hurt; and, as I said a little while ago, I'm serving under your banner till we do find him."

Nick Carter seized Buck's hand and shook it warmly.

"It is no sign of weakness in a man, to shed a tear for a friend," he said, earnestly.

"God bless you, Mr. Carter. Tom'll be sitting up there, looking on and approving, while we work, and if, when this thing is done and we've trailed down the Greaser and his outfit, you should happen sometime when there ain't anybody near you, to feel a slap on your back that you don't know where it came from, you can just bet your sweet life it'll be Tom, and he'll be saying, 'Bully for you, Carter! Bully for you!'"

"I think we'll find him, Buck," said Nick.

"Find him? Why, we'll find him if he hides at the bottom of the crater of Popocatapetl. Oh, yes, we'll find him."

CHAPTER V.

THE ENEMY ENTERS NICK CARTER'S HOME.

"Inspector," said Nick, "we have figured out pretty well how this thing happened, but it strikes me that we have neglected the question, why did it happen?"

"I was just thinking of that, Nick," replied the inspector. "I do not believe that it was done by the command of Irma Plavatski, and if it was done without it, why, the only motive that we can attribute to the deed is that the man Cortez was getting even with Chelsea for putting himself in your way so that you could steal his identity, as you did when you captured the woman, and getting into that cellar where the Devil Worshipers met."

"It wasn't that, either, inspector."

"What, then?"

"Jealousy."

"Eh?"

"Jealousy, inspector, nothing else."

"Do you mean that Irma Plavatski was in love with Chelsea, and that Cortez knew it?"

"Just about that. If I am any judge of a woman's human nature, she met with the greatest disappointment of her life when she discovered in the cellar of the Devil Worshipers, that the man she believed to be Thomas Chelsea, was another. It made very little difference to her that it happened to be Nick Carter. The only shock to her was that it was not Thomas Chelsea. Understand?"

"Well?"

"When, for one instant, she believed that he had betrayed her, she was like a tigress, but when she discovered that the betrayal was through no fault of his, her manner changed entirely. She didn't seem to care what happened."

"So you followed out your old habit of putting two and two together."

"Exactly. Now if you will recall what happened at the time we rounded up the Devil Worshipers in the cellar, you will remember that Irma, as Dazaar, offered no objections to permitting herself to be strapped to the shield; and that was a genuine fool-thing for her to do, and something that she never would have done if she had been in possession of her usual astuteness and shrewdness."

"Then why did she permit it?"

"Simply because she believed that I was Thomas Chelsea, and that she was in love with him. Being in love with him, she had perfect confidence in him. She

knew that he was a man of unusual nerve and daring, and she saw an opportunity to show that she was not afraid. She did not, of course, think that he recognized her in her disguise as the chief of the Devil's clique, but when the time came to lay aside her disguise, she would be in a position to assure him that she had nerve and daring also; and she knew that he admired those qualities above all others."

"That is good reasoning, Nick."

"I think it is correct, too. Now, we come to the remaining point, and it is this——"

"Out with it."

"There is more truth in this talk about the Seven, than we have supposed. In fact, I have no doubt that there was at one time seven adept followers of hers, who did her bidding, and who acted as her agents so that she could herself remain in the dark. The man who killed himself with radium in the cell at headquarters, was one of them; Cortez is another; whether there are still others or not, I cannot say, only that I do think the Thibetans we captured were nothing more than servants—and I also think that if there were seven, besides Dazaar or Irma, six of them are either dead or in another country, and the seventh is Cortez. Do you follow me?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, Cortez has discovered that Irma, or in other words, Dazaar, is in love with Chelsea. I think it would be in keeping with her character to tell him so and defy him, even though she is in prison; and that would explain why he killed Chelsea. Now another thing——"

"Well?"

"I want you to do me a very great favor."

"What is it, Nick?"

"I want you to bring Irma Plavatski to this room before a single change is made in its appearance, or before we move Chelsea's body out of the chair where it now rests."

"Splendid, Nick. I'll do it."

"Bring her to this room. Tell her nothing that she will see when she gets here. When she arrives, I will meet her alone—the rest of you can wait in the third room, out of sight—and I will tell her that she is wanted in that room where the body is. I think, if Irma Plavatski can ever be prevailed upon to talk, it will be when she discovers the corpse of the man she loved, and knows that he was killed by one of her own followers. Now, how soon can you have her here?"

"Inside of an hour."

"I need not suggest that you keep her well guarded."

The inspector smiled, and in another moment he had driven away in a carriage, accompanied by two of his men.

"I will bring her here myself," was all he said, but it was enough. Nick knew that there would be no danger of her escaping.

* * * * * * *

It is necessary, here, to disgress for a moment from the main thread of our story in order to describe other incidents which occurred after the detective left his home, which he did about nine o'clock in the evening, it will be remembered.

The reader will recall the fact that he left his wife engaged upon some embroidery work in her own sitting room, and that Patsy was with her; also that Ten-Ichi was out at the time.

Nick had been absent from the house less than half an hour when there was a ring at the door, and presently the servant came to announce that there was a gentleman in the parlor to see Mr. Carter.

Word was sent down to the caller that Mr. Carter could not be seen, and the servant promptly returned with the message that the gentleman would consider it a favor if one of his assistants would receive him for a moment, as he came on very urgent business.

"You had better see who it is and what he wants, Patsy," said Ethel, "but remember your orders not to leave the house."

"I'll not forget," replied Patsy, and he went out of the room.

When a quarter of an hour had passed and he did not return, Ethel began to feel some surprise at his delay, but decided that the business was of real importance, and, therefore, detained him; but when half an hour had passed, and he still did not return, she

began to feel some genuine alarm, and at last she rang the bell for her maid.

The maid did not appear, and she rang again; but still there was no answer, and she was on the point of going in search of Patsy herself, when the door of her sitting room was opened softly, and a man—a total stranger to her, stood in the doorway.

She had heard Nick describe many of the characters with whom he had been brought in contact since the presence of Dazaar in the city of New York, and she instantly recognized in this stranger the person to whom he had referred as Don Murillo Cortez, who had first been introduced to him by a banker, named Gray, and who was without doubt, one of the followers of Dazaar.

Instantly she realized the terrible danger she was in, and with a bound that would have done credit to her husband, she leaped toward the library table which stood in the center of the room, in the drawer of which there was always a loaded revolver.

The stranger was too quick for her, however, for even as she pulled the drawer open, his hand fell upon her arm and snatched it away, and the next instant she was whirled around, away from the table, and, in spite of her struggles, thrust backward into the chair where she had been seated a moment before.

Then, and then only, she opened her mouth to scream, but the man's other hand was thrust rudely across it, and her cry was stifled, while the cold, clear voice of the stranger, with just a trace of foreign accent in the pronunciation, told her to be silent.

"If you cry out or attempt to call for assistance, madam," he said, "I will be compelled to chloroform you. Be silent and you will not be injured."

Horror of chloroform is natural to everybody, and Ethel instantly decided that she would much prefer to keep her senses about her, and to save her cries for a moment when there might be more promise of their attracting attention than at the present moment, and so she kept silent.

With the celerity of a practiced hand, the stranger snapped a pair of diminutive handcuffs upon Ethel's wrists, and then, with a courtesy that would have been ludicrous, had it been less tragic, he placed a second pair in her shackled hands, and said:

"Will you fasten these upon your ankles, or will you compel me to do it for you?"

Without a word of protest, she leaned forward and snapped the irons around her ankles, noticing as she did so, that the connecting chain between them was sufficiently long to permit one who wore them to take short steps, so that walking was not rendered utterly impossible, although any effort in that direction must necessarily be very slow.

"Now, madam," said Cortez, "will you walk to the carriage that is awaiting us at the door or will you compel me to chloroform, and carry you?"

"Where are you taking me?" she demanded.

The man smiled coldly, and replied:

"I think, madam, that the circumstances are such that I must request you to comply with my wishes without asking questions. I have treated you with becoming courtesy, thus far, and I will continue to do so as long as you offer no resistance or objections. I will not answer for the continuance of my patience. Be assured that there is nobody near to come to your assistance, so it will be better for you if you obey me without questions."

"When I get to the street I will scream," was Ethel's thought; and she said aloud:

"Very well. I will go."

"You will need your hat and wraps," said Cortez. "Where are they?"

She told him, and, presently, he threw the coat around her shoulders, and with the remark that she could adjust her hat after she was in the carriage, he led her down the stairs.

At the front door he paused a moment, and drawing one of the Dazaar daggers from its sheath, he showed the glittering blade to her, and said:

"I know that it is your intention to call for aid when we reach the street. Let me warn you not to do so. If you do, I will drive this knife through your heart, and I will escape."

He grasped her by the arm to steady her, and so led her unresistingly down the steps and across the pave-

ment to the carriage. Then, half lifting her inside, he followed and closed the door, while the driver immediately whipped up his horses and drove rapidly away.

CHAPTER VI.

A LEVER TO LIFT HER OUT OF SILENCE.

Ten-Ichi, as the reader knows, was off duty and had gone out that evening for a stroll, and it so happened that he turned the adjacent corner toward the house on his return, just at the moment that the carriage drove away from the curb.

He was not in time to discover who had entered it, or, indeed, to see that any person had done so, and as it was by no means an unusual thing for carriages to approach and to leave from the front of Nick Carter's house, he cast only a casual glance upon it as it dashed past him along the street.

It was just such a sidelong glance as will leave an impression upon the mind without immediately arresting the attention, and when he was ascending the steps of the house, he paused suddenly with one foot upon the top step, for he remembered in that instant that the man who drove the vehicle had reminded him rather indefinately of the Thibetans with whom he had been brought so closely in contact during the last few weeks.

"Strange," he thought, "that I didn't notice the fact at the moment it attracted my attention," and he turned his glance up the street, noticing that the carriage had already turned the corner and disappeared.

Then he took his key from his pocket and admitted himself to the house.

The instant he opened the door he paused suddenly and uttered an exclamation of astonishment in his own language, which showed that he was more than usually purturbed.

The fact was that his nostrils were assailed by an odor which to another than himself might have been indescribable, but which he instantly recognized, and he turned and leaped quickly through the door again into the vestibule where, without loss of time, he drew a silk handkerchief from his pocket and bound it tightly over his face, so that only his eyes remained uncovered.

Then, with a revolver in either hand, he threw the door open a second time and cautiously stepped across the threshold.

"The polpa-powder!" he thought. "Surely there has been mischief of some kind here."

He was well aware of the almost instantaneous effect of the subtle powder that is more fine than any flour and lighter in weight than the air, and he knew that to walk unprotected into a room where it had been liberated in any quantity would mean that he would instantly be rendered unconscious. Readers of the Dazaar series will recall how effectively he used it himself on one occasion and will understand why he proceeded with so much caution.

"Whoever has been here has not thought it necessary to turn off the lights," thought Ten-Ichi, for every electric light in the house, seemed, as far as he could determine, to be ablaze.

He paused and listened attentively for a moment, but not a sound of any description came to his ears.

With the thought in his mind that it would be well for him to cover the ground as he advanced, he turned toward the door of the reception room which was tightly closed, and which, as a rule, was left ajar when the room was not occupied.

Without pausing to tap a summons upon the panels, he threw it open, and, as he did so, uttered a short exclamation of surprise.

That room, like the hall, was brilliantly lighted, and in the center of it, stretched upon the rug at full length and looking more like a corpse than a living person, was Patsy.

In an instant Ten-Ichi leaped into the room, seized the still figure in his arms and dragged it into the hallway, where, having dropped Patsy on the floor again, he re-entered the reception room, threw open the windows, and then returning to the hall, closed the door tightly behind him.

One glance at Patsy's features had told him that the young assistant was a victim of the subtle polpa-powder, and that the room in which he had discovered him was saturated with the drug; and he realized also that the hall and the rest of the house was doubtless free from it. At the same time, he did not remove the bandage

from his face, for he was not yet certain, and the mere act of entering a room where it was would overcome him. There might be other rooms where its agency had also been employed, and he wished to be prepared for anything that might happen.

Without pausing to devote any further attention to Patsy, for he knew that now, freed from the immediate presence of the floating powder, the Irish lad would soon revive without assistance, Ten-Ichi bounded up the stairs to the sitting room which Ethel was in the habit of occupying.

One glance into the room developed the fact that it was unoccupied, and a more careful survey of the apartment could add nothing to his knowledge, for Ethel had been able to leave no sign behind her.

The mere presence of the polpa-powder in the house, however, told Ten-Ichi as plainly as big, black lettering could have done, that one or more of the followers of Dazaar had been there and had taken the wife of his chief away with him; and he realized, all too late, that the carriage that passed him as he approached the house on his return had borne Ethel away from it.

Further search revealed the fact that the servants had been subjected to the same treatment that had been meted out to Patsy, and that one and all of them had fallen victims to the insidious subtlety of the polpa-powder, which did its work so quickly and so thoroughly that any person in making use of it had only to inject the substance into a room through a keyhole in order to overcome, immediately, every occupant of that room.

When the servants were at last revived, not one of them could remember anything whatever of the occurrence. Indeed, it was difficult at first to make them believe that they had been rendered unconscious by the use of a foreign agency. The powder left no ill effects behind it, and not a thing that had happened could be recalled.

With Patsy, however, it was different.

It was not the first time that he had experienced the effect of the polpa-powder, only it had been Ten-Ichi, instead of an enemy, who had made use of it the other time. Still, he remembered, with very good reason, that momentous occasion.

When Ten-Ichi related what had happened, and besought Patsy to relate everything that had taken place, so far as he could recall the incidents, his first remark was to ask what time it was, and when Ten-Ichi replied that it was half-past ten, he remarked that exactly an hour had elapsed since he was called downstairs to the reception room.

Then, in a few words, he related all that had happened since Ten-Ichi left the house early in the evening, beginning with the inspector's call upon the detective, and recalling the particular warning given by Nick Carter, that neither of his assistants should go out of the house until his return; and then he came to the point where he was called down to the reception room himself.

"When I entered the reception room," said Patsy, "the man who was there, whoever he might have been, for I had only an indistinct view of him, must have been behind the door, for at first I saw nobody. But I had stepped across the threshold, and instantly the door was snatched from my hands and closed with a bang. I wheeled, but only to find myself enveloped in a cloud of dustlike powder, through which, dimly, and for an instant only, I could see the form of a stranger. Then I remember nothing more till just now."

"What are we to do now?" he asked, when he had completed his story.

"I'll tell you," replied Ten-Ichi. "Fortunately there are two of us here, and, therefore, we are enabled to do two things at once."

"Sure," assented Patsy.

"The first, and, therefore, the most important thing to do, is to carry the intelligence to the chief without delay."

"Right you are, Ten-Ichi. It wouldn't do to keep him waiting."

"Very well. You go there where he is at once, and leave me to go my own way. Tell the chief that I saw the carriage that bore Mrs. Carter away, and that I am going to try to get track of it—that I will work from this end, independently. While there is no ap-

parent clew, I have the feeling that I can pick up one, for I can describe the carriage and the driver, and it will be strange if they were not noticed by somebody along the route they followed. Do you know where to find the chief?"

"Sure," said Patsy.

"Then get there as quickly as you can."

* * * * * * *

So, it happened that the inspector had been gone from the apartments at the Drury Arms, where Thomas Chelsea had met such an untimely end, only a very few moments when Patsy arrived there with the disturbing news of the invasion of the detective's house.

After the first shock of surprise, Nick Carter listened in silence to the end of the tale, for it was characteristic of the man that he acted with the greatest moderation at critical times when another less experienced and less determined man would have leaped at the effort of "doing something" at once.

"It is too bad that Ten-Ichi didn't return sixty seconds sooner than he did," said the detective, quietly, when Patsy had finished, "but as it is, if there is a trail to find, the little Jap will find it, and if he does not find one, we will hear from him very soon. If he doesn't show up here by the time we are ready to leave, there will be a good reason for his absence."

Even Patsy wondered at the quiet manner of the detective, but the next remark that Nick Carter made, enlightened him.

"Patsy," he said, "we can find out where they have taken Mrs. Carter, by remaining right where we are for the present. The only person in the world who will be able to enlighten us, aside from the man who took her away, will be brought to this room in the care of the inspector, in a very few minutes. It was Cortez who took her away, Patsy, and it is Irma Plavatski who is coming here; Irma Plavatski, or, in other words, Dazaar."

Then he turned to Buck Granger.

"Buck," he said, "the same man who murdered your master, has been to my house since I came here, and stolen my wife. I think now, my friend, that we have common cause together."

"Bet your life we have, sir, and it's a million to one that we'll win out, too."

"Win out, Buck? Of course we'll win out. There is never any other view to take of matters of this kind."

"And this woman you have sent for, Mr. Carter, do you think she will know something about it?"

"Yes; I not only think she will know about it, but I also think she will be willing to tell about it. She will do anything to get square with the person who has killed the man she loved. That is the lever that will lift her out of silence, Buck."

CHAPTER VII.

IN THE PRESENCE OF DAZAAR.

The time was not really very long, although to those who waited it seemed almost interminable before the inspector ushered Irma Plavatski into the room where Nick Carter was awaiting her, for the others of the company had withdrawn, at his request, to another room.

Irma seemed to be more beautiful than ever, if such a thing were possible, and she carried herself with an outward appearance of assurance and ease, that was inimitable.

"This is an unexpected honor, Mr. Carter," she said, inclining her head haughtily when she entered the room. "Whatever your reason may be for bringing me here, and I suppose it is an important one, else you would not have sent for me, allow me to say that I am indebted to you for a most pleasurable freedom, even if it is only momentary."

"It is not to me to whom you are indebted," replied Nick, coldly.

"No? May I then venture to inquire the name of the person to whom my thanks are due?"

"Thomas Chelsea," said Nick, shortly.

The woman started, and Nick thought that she paled a little. He was sure that there was an almost imperceptible catching of her breath, but she replied almost instantly:

"Really, you surprise me; and may I add that I think you also deceive me? If I were a man, and accustomed

to stronger terms of expression, I might state my opinion in two words; that is, I might say, you lie."

"It happens, however, that I tell the truth. Mr. Chelsea is in that room, waiting."

Nick pointed toward the closed door beyond which, still resting in the chair where he was done to death, was the body of Thomas Chelsea. The inspector had withdrawn to a far corner of the room and was discreetly silent.

Irma glanced toward the closed door and shrugged her shoulders.

"Then I must insist, since he is my host, that he is not overcourteous," she said.

"Unfortunately for him, and for you also, he is unable to leave that room," said Nick.

The remark told upon her instantly, for she took one little step toward the detective, and bending toward him in her eagerness for further knowledge, she said:

"Is he ill?" she demanded, while her eyes widened and fixed themselves intently upon the detective; but the reply which came instantly, seemed entirely to reassure her, for she threw her head back quickly and laughed aloud.

"So," she said. "He is a prisoner, then, like myself, and you have brought me here to appear against him, to discover if you can incriminate him with my affairs. Is that it?"

"No; that is not it, either."

"What, then?"

"Step this way and find out," said Nick.

He crossed the room past her and threw open the door, taking care to stand in such a position that she would be unable to see into the room until she crossed the threshold.

With an expression on her face that was closely akin to bewilderment, Irma followed him.

She had passed through the door and was inside the bedroom before she discovered the figure of Chelsea seated in the chair opposite the entrance; and even then, she did not observe that he was dead.

Nevertheless, there was a certain stillness about the form in the chair that awed her, for she hesitated one instant as if to assure herself that it was indeed Chelsea, and then moved forward toward him.

She made three or four quick strides before the truth was forced upon her, and then she stopped still in her tracks, poised upon the ball of one foot and the full imprint of the other, as if the sudden horror of what she saw had arrested all the animation within her while she was in the act of taking a step, and had left her almost free from the floor she trod upon.

The detective had withdrawn to one side and was standing near the bed, watching her. The inspector had followed to the doorway, and stood just within it, also watching. Both were silent and attentive.

If, however, either of them expected the usual vehement outbreaking of poignant grief, they were doomed to disappointment, for Irma remained absolutely still.

Nick, who had taken a position so that he could keep her face in view, saw that only her eyes had motion, but that they darted their lightning-like glances from point to point until they had taken in every detail of the situation.

But he saw more than that. He saw the color go out of her face, and a deathlike whiteness take its place. He saw the muscles of the throat contract, the brows draw together, the pupils of her eyes narrow to the size of pin-points and the nostrils spread open.

Full sixty seconds passed before she moved at all, and during that time the officers who watched the scene remained as silent as she was. It was a period of intensest excitement into which no whisper of sound entered to break the spell.

Irma Plavatski was different from all other women with whom the detective had come in contact, and now, it seemed, that she was to prove herself quite as widely different in her anguish and grief as in other things.

Presently she glided forward again, pausing a second time when she was within a yard of the corpse, and again lapsing into that statuesque attitude of observation and study.

Then, after another moment had elapsed, she permitted herself to sink slowly to her knees in front of the corpse of the man she had loved, and so she remained for a length of time that extended so long that

twice the detective and the inspector exchanged glances of amazement and interrogative surprise.

It seemed almost as if she were praying, only that the thought of prayer could not be entertained in connection with the character of Irma Plavatski; and yet, her subsequent action suggested it more strongly than ever.

She rose from her knees, and stepping still nearer to the body, bent forward and pressed her lips against the cold forehead of the man who had been so vilely slain. Then, straightening her body, she turned, and with not a trace of emotion upon her face, save the deathlike pallor that enveloped it, she said, addressing Nick Carter:

"You have brought me here to tell you who killed him?"

"Yes," replied Nick. "We brought you here to tell us more than that, for I know who killed him. It was the man whom I have met and known as Cortez. That much we know now; but Irma Plavatski, you were brought here to tell us where to find and to bring to justice the murderer of the man you loved."

"Yes, I loved him; I loved Thomas Chelsea," she admitted, speaking more to her own consciousness than to Nick's.

"Then you will help us," said Nick.

She was silent for a moment, and then, with slow emphasis, she replied:

"Upon certain conditions that I will make, I will betray the murderer of Thomas Chelsea into your hands, although I would much prefer to deal with him myself. You will merely take his life in redress for this one, but I would make him suffer the agonies of the thousand times damned, and make his life for one whole year, a lingering horror of agony and torture. But you will not permit that?"

"No," said Nick.

"Then I will make my conditions, and if you accept them, deliver him up to you."

"What are your conditions?"

"Have no fear, Mr. Carter, for they will not be difficult for you to accord to me. The whole world has undergone a change since I entered this room."

"What are your conditions?"

"There has been a change going on within me ever since I met Thomas Chelsea," she continued, ignoring the question. "It had already begun when you visited the cellar where you captured me. If it had not been for that I would not now be your prisoner. I was learning to love, but the fullness of love never came till I entered this room. You did the wisest act of your life in bringing me here, Mr. Carter."

"Again," he said, "what are your conditions?"

"These," she said, taking a step nearer to the detective and still ignoring the presence of the inspector who stood in the doorway. "You must permit me to remain with the body of the man I loved until it is put away from me forever, in the grave. You may put an iron belt around my waist, if you will, and chain me to the wall, but you must not take me from this room, and you must not shackle my hands or my feet. Place as many as you will here to keep watch over me, for although I will promise you, and do promise you now, that I will make no effort to escape from you, I know that you will not believe me."

"No; we could not accept your word for that, madam."

"Then my condition resolves itself to this: You must assure me that I may remain with the body of Thomas Chelsea, and never be taken from it till it is in the grave, and that my hands and feet must be free to use during that time. What other arrangements you make for my safe-keeping do not concern me."

"And if we grant your request, you agree to tell us all you know about——"

"I agree to make a full confession to you, to the inspector here, and to a third person who can take down my words as I utter them; and—it is now nearly midnight—I will further assure you that you will have the murderer of Thomas Chelsea in custody before dawn."

"We agree to your conditions," said the inspector, from the doorway, before Nick could reply.

"Thank you, sir," she said, turning toward him. "Again I assure you that I will make no effort to escape from you. You may believe me or not, but I will tell you this: If I were free to leave this house now

and to go my way, I would remain here—with him. If you should all withdraw I would still remain here and watch over all that remains of the man I loved. If you should offer me my freedom, I would not accept it till after he is in his grave, and even then only for the purpose of finding the man who killed him and making him acquainted with degrees of suffering that no human being has ever known before in this world; and after that, I would return to you and gladly suffer any penalty you might put upon me, for, gentlemen, I know better than you can tell it to me, that my own hand is behind this murder. I am the cause of it. My teachings have made it possible. It was not my hand that struck Thomas Chelsea down, but it was my power that was behind that hand. You regard me in amazement because the horror of this scene does not affect me as it would affect others, but it is for you to remember that I am not as other human beings. I have told Nick Carter, here, that I am a sorceress, but I am more, and worse than a sorceress, for I am a fiend—a devil—a monstrosity—a travesty upon creation—the spirit and the consciousness of a being who has inhabited this world for more centuries than you are years old now, for the time being existing in the guise of a young and beautiful woman. I was warned against this fate when I became Irma Plavatski, and the prophecy has come true. I have met it. Listen to my confession, and you shall not only know the truth, but you shall learn how to rid the world of Dazaar forever."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HYPNOTIC MESSAGE OF DAZAAR.

"Shall we go into the next room?" asked the inspector; but Irma threw one glance of utter scorn upon him as she replied:

"Have I not said that I will not leave the presence of the body of Thomas Chelsea again until it is under the ground?"

"One moment," said Nick. "Before we go into the matter of the confession, I have something to say, and I have waited this long because I knew well that Irma Plavatski would not utter the words I most desire to hear until she was induced to a proper frame of mind by the incident that has happened here." Then, addressing her directly, he added:

"After Murillo Cortez came here and killed Tom Chelsea, he went to my house, and by making use of his polpa-powder, he has entrapped my wife. She is now in his power. He took her away in a carriage that was driven by a Thibetan."

"He will not dare to injure her without my knowledge and permission," said Irma.

"He dared to injure Thomas Chelsea."

"But this is different. He knew that I loved Thomas Chelsea, and killed him through jealousy. He dared to do that by the power of his own conceit, because he believed that with Chelsea out of the way I would accept him again."

"Ah!"

"But he will not dare to offer so much as an indignity to your wife, for he knows that I would not forgive him if he did."

"Nevertheless," said Nick, "measures must be taken at once to liberate her."

"And if I refuse?" asked Irma, but in a tone which seemed to assure her listeners that she had no thought of refusing.

"In that case," said Nick, "notwithstanding what the inspector has said, for I believe he will bear me out in this, you shall be returned to your prison cell at once without your confession, and I will hunt Cortez down without your aid."

"Nick Carter, you are a brave and a daring man. If it pleases you to know it, then know that you have my full admiration."

"It does not please me. I don't care for your admiration, madam."

"No? But you shall have proof that although I am in your power, although I am a prisoner here I can still reach outside your walls and chains and direct that my will be done."

"Give us the proof, then."

"Have you an assistant here, or a person whom you can trust?"

"Yes."

"Call him, or them; if there are two it will be better."

"One is Patsy, whom you know."

"Patsy? Yes. And I owe him some reparation, too. He shall have it. Call him. Now, who is the other? The one who talks Thibetan?"

"No; he is not here. It is the man who was the friend and confident of the dead man, there."

"Buck Granger. Call him."

"Do you know him also?"

"No. I have never seen him, but I know about him. Call him also."

Nick called them, and in a moment they entered the room.

"You are Buck Granger?" she asked, addressing the tall ex-cowboy.

"I reckon I am, lady," he replied.

"You loved—him—did you not?" she asked, pointing at the silent form in the chair.

"I reckon I did. Did you call me in here to ask me that?"

"No. I asked that you be called so that I could tell you that before the sun rises the man who killed him will be in Nick Carter's power. Nay, more. I will force him to deliver himself to these men here in this room; but you, Buck Granger, must help me."

Buck glanced sideways at Nick, and the detective nodded to him in reply to the silent question, and said:

"Do as she directs you to do, Buck."

"All right. I'm on. Fire away, madam. What's the lay?"

"I have been told that you speak Spanish," she replied. "Is it true?"

"I talk the Greaser's lingo, but I reckon it's about the same."

"It will do. Get me a pen and ink, and then bare your right arm to the elbow."

"Going to tattoo me?"

"Merely with ordinary ink and without pricking the flesh. It will wash off."

The ink was brought, and Buck, having bared his arm as directed, approached Irma, who stood in the middle of the floor, pen in hand, ready for him.

Pulling the skin down on either side of the arm until it was drawn tightly across it, and thus presented a smooth surface, she rapidly traced these characters upon it, which in design might have been Chinese, but which Nick knew were not.

Then, having drawn them there, she still held the arm firmly in her grasp, while she raised her eyes slowly to him, and in a low tone she said to him:

"Watch the figures I have made on your arm and tell me when they are dry."

His eyes sank to his arm again, but hers remained fixed upon him, until suddenly, after a minute or two had passed, she released the arm, and taking a step back, she said:

"Raise your eyes, cover your arm again, and listen to my commands."

Then, to the astonishment of all, she began to speak rapidly in Thibetan, while to every word she uttered, Buck paid the most absolute attention, and it was at once evident that he understood what she was saying.

Thus, she talked on rapidly for several minutes, at intervals taking him by the arm she had marked, and pointing to the locality where she had made the tracings. And then, as abruptly as she began, she ceased speaking.

Turning to Patsy, she said:

"Young man, your duty in this affair consists in following blindly wherever Buck Granger shall lead you, and in guarding him against collision in the streets, for he will go as one who is blind. During all the time you are with him, until you return to this room and to me, do not speak to him."

And then, turning to Nick, she said:

"By asking Buck Granger to concentrate his gaze upon his arm and thus diverting his attention from other things, I have been able to get him perfectly un-

der the hypnotic spell. In that condition I have imbued him with a knowledge of Thibetan, sufficient for our purposes, and he goes to Murillo Cortez as my accredited messenger."

"But Cortez will know that he is hypnotized.

"Of a surety he will know it, and it will be unmistakable proof to him that my orders are transmitted literally, and that no person in the world other than myself could have issued them. It is the only way in which I can compel Cortez to obey me now—by sending a hypnotic message. Any other means he might have an excuse for doubting, but this he will know is real."

"Well, what then, after Buck finds Cortez?"

"Murillo Cortez will deliver your wife into the charge of Buck and Patsy and they will conduct her safely to your house, where the servant will receive her, after which they will return here. At five o'clock in the morning Murillo Cortez will come here to this house."

"Here to this house? To the house where the body of his victim will be awaiting him?"

"Ay, here to this house, but he will come in the belief that he will be able to rescue me from your clutches. That is the hope I have held out to him. Buck will instruct him exactly what to do, and it will be to Cortez as if I uttered the words in person, for he will know that the messenger is repeating only what I have instructed—or rather, commanded him to say. You need give yourself no concern, Mr. Carter. My plans will work perfectly."

Nick regarded her, still with some doubt in his eyes, and she must have read his thoughts, for with a little sad smile that was almost pathetic, she said:

"You are asking yourself if you can trust me. You are wondering if this may not be another of my fiendish schemes to get these two in my power and to deliver them over to your enemies, so that there may perhaps be an exchange of prisoners."

"I will confess," replied Nick, "that such thoughts did occur to me."

"Dismiss them, then, for I tell you, and truly, that this is the only way in which your wishes can be carried out—it is the only way in which your wife can be returned to your own home in perfect safety this night; and it is the only way in which the murderer of Thomas Chelsea can be delivered over to you alive, for if he found that you pursued him too closely and that there was no chance for him to escape, he would take his own life, instantly, and as effectively as Gracchi did—for that was the name of the man who killed himself with radium, as you call it, but with sun fire, as I know it to be, in the cell at police headquarters. And last, but not least, Mr. Carter, as you have reason to know, it is the only way in which you will be enabled to clear away entirely from the vicinity of New York, all those who have knowledge of the ways of Dazaar."

"There are others, then, besides Cortez?"

"Yes, there are others, but they are inferiors. Three of them, Cortez will bring here with him to aid him in the supposed work of rescuing me, and they must be sacrificed. What remains besides the three will have orders, before he leaves them, to leave the country and return to their own land, there to remain for the rest of their days. Do you still object to the expedition of Buck Granger and Patsy?"

"No. Let them go."

Again Irma turned to Patsy.

"Remember my instructions," she said. "You are to go with Buck Granger without being with him. You will take his arm and guide him while being led by him. You will not address a word to him, for he will not understand what you are saying if you do so. You will go with him to the house he will visit, and remain outside while he enters, and until he rejoins you, and when

he does so Mrs. Carter will be with him. You will take her home, and then guide Buck Granger back here to me. If you fail in carrying out these instructions to the letter, Nick Carter's plans will fail, and you will be the cause."

Patsy did not deign a reply to the woman. His contempt for her was too profound; but he crossed the room to the door and stood there waiting.

Irma turned to Buck Granger then. He had stood, while she was talking, apparently heedless of everything that was said, and now at a motion from her he passed through the door and out upon the street with Patsy clinging to his arm.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CONFESSIONS OF DAZAAR—A WOMAN'S HEART.

"Before I begin with my confession, gentlemen," said Irma, "let me suggest to you that if you have not men enough already in these apartments to cope with four brawny Thibetans, to say nothing of Murillo Cortez, who is a veritable tiger when he is aroused, and who is second in power and resource only to myself, it would be well for you to send for others without delay. When Cortez appears here, at five o'clock in the morning, he will do so with the intention of rescuing me, and in the belief that he will succeed in doing so. He is not an easy man to conquer, and the men he will bring with him are giants of strength."

"That is a good suggestion," said the inspector. "I will direct one of my men to telephone for others at once."

"And now," said Irma, when he had returned to the room, "I shall say what I have to say to you while seated here beside this dead man, and with his hand in mine. Whatever doubts you may have in mind while I am speaking, I beg that you will try to dismiss them for I shall speak only the truth.

"You will hear some strange and wonderful things that are beyond your limit of belief, and if you find that your reason cannot credit those things, attribute my statements to whatever motive you please, save he one of untruth, for in all that I say I shall be perfectly sincere.

"First, then, I am Dazaar.

"I, whom you have known as Irma Plavatski, am not Irma Plavatski at all, for Irma has been in the region of spirits these five years or more. She is what you would call dead, and I, Dazaar, am here in her place, living in her body as you sometimes live in other people's houses.

"Second, Dazaar, originally, was not even a woman, but a man, but I who was a man at one time, and if you will believe me, for many times, am now a woman. In laying aside the outward appearance of a man, and in adopting the guise of a woman, and especially of a young and beautiful woman, the high priest of the Inner Temple of Thibet, who is the ruler of all Thibet and the holder of all knowledge and to whom the Grand Lama is a baby weakling, warned me that I would become a woman, with a woman's guile and a woman's heart, and that, notwithstanding my varied experiences which should be sufficient to guard me against accidents of emotion or impulse, that I would find the end of my long existence and experience through a woman's emotions. How truly he spoke, this moment is the proof.

"Can I make you understand that among the mountain fastnesses of Thibet, where the foot of man, as you know men, has never trod, there dwell many men who have lived for centuries, and yet who are still young? You do not believe, because you will not believe, but it is nevertheless true. There are men there who have lived thousands of years, and whose wisdom and knowledge have found the solution of mysteries so profound that you deem it a sacrilege to investigate them.

"Enough of that. Now, in a word, to tell you how

they live through ages of time and still preserve their youth.

"It is a very simple method, although it seems to you so profound, and yet it is explained by a word with which you are perfectly familiar, for that word is hypnotism.

"Let us, in order to explain this to you, imagine one of these men who is growing old, and who begins to feel the desire to renew his youth. He selects a strong and healthy boy who has not passed the age of ten years, conducts him to the temple, and to a room which he has provided and keeps provided for the purpose, and there he places that boy under the influence of the hypnotic power.

"Through many years after that—ten at least, and sometimes many more—that hypnotized boy is never permitted to wake from his hypnotic sleep, and is only partially aroused at intervals in order that he may be nourished with food. After years have passed in this way the control of the operator becomes so perfect that there may almost be said to exist two living bodies that are actuated by the same soul; but that is not true, because the soul of the boy is never absent from the body; it is only dormant, dwarfed and imbecile, and it only retains its hold upon the body by the merest thread of existence which any sudden noise might snap. For that reason, as you can understand, the room is a silent one, far away from the possibility of invasion by any sudden noise.

"The time comes when the man who is growing old desires the change to a younger body, and he prepares for it by putting the subject under his control into a much deeper sleep than usual. Then a third person, who is also an adept, is introduced into the room. He is provided with a huge gong, and he takes up a position close to the sleeping young man on the couch, and the old man, who is bending over him with all his mind and energy concentrated upon the object of his desires.

"At precisely the right instant a terrible crash is struck upon the gong, and with the terrible sound—awful, indeed, in that silent, tomblike place—the old man who is bending above the couch drops upon the floor, dead, and the young man who has been sleeping for years upon that couch leaps to his feet, filled with life and animation.

"But, gentlemen, it is not the sleeping boy that has awakened; it is the old man who a moment ago stood beside the couch that has stolen the young man's body for his future habitation.

"The soul of the young man has simply been crowded out of existence, just as you might thrust a child off a platform into the sea, and the soul of the old man has taken the place thus left vacant, just as you might seat yourself in a chair that another person had vacated, and this sort of thing goes on, in endless repetition, for years and years, even into centuries, so that it is nothing for one man to have lived a thousand years and to have owned three hundred different bodies during that time. Besides, among the higher classes of people in Thibet, it is considered a great honor to have a son of their house selected for a habitation of one of the wise men.

"Do you understand that much? I do not ask you to believe, but only to admit that I make myself plain.

"People in Thibet deplore the birth of a daughter, for the reason that girls are never selected for the higher heaven, to which the deserted bodies of the wise men are supposed to go after they are abandoned, and in making an exception to that rule I lost my caste and was compelled to go out into the world. I could no longer remain in Thibet.

"But I had lived through many generations—I will not tell you how many, lest I try your credulity too far; and there remained one degree of knowledge which I had not attained—a degree which could only be attained by becoming a woman.

"I discussed the subject many times with my asso-

ciates, only to be scorned by them for the suggestion, and at last, when I had thoroughly determined to adopt that course I was warned, as I have already told you.

"I chose, however, to disregard the warning, and I set about to find me a fit female subject for the hypnotic spell. I need not tell you about that, save to say that there was not one in all Thibet who gave sufficient promise of beauty to commend herself to me, and at last—where and how it does not matter—I discovered Irma Plavatski.

"And here, let me say to you, Mr. Carter, that the woman whom you have known as Madam Aira is all that she pretends to be. She has followed the fortunes of Irma through the last five years, because she believed Irma to be under a spell, and in sheer love of chicanery I have played a dual character for her benefit.

"In the guise of a woman I lost none of the devilish ingenuity which was mine before, and none of the wisdom I had attained as a high priest of Thibet, but I developed a fondness for cruelty and a love for visiting suffering upon others, which I had never possessed before. Whether that is due to the fact of being a woman or merely to ordinary perversion because of my expulsion from Thibet, I cannot say; but I have devised all sorts of measures and methods for the infliction of suffering, and it has been my passion and delight to find victims for my pastimes.

"Of late I have grown tired of being a woman, and had not this man, who is now dead, been thrust into my life, according to the prophecy of the high priest, I should, after a few more years, have returned to my man's estate, and therefore have returned to Thibet.

"But, yet, Thibet did not satisfy me. I have traveled much, before and since I have been Mademoiselle Plavatski. I have passed much time in almost every country of the globe. Japan, especially, and even the Mikado of that country, has felt the weight of my hand and the blight of my presence. In England, too, I have had much to do in the past. Years ago the grandfather of the present Earl of Croydon incurred my displeasure, and it has been my own pleasure since that time to make him and his descendants suffer. The present girl, and his countess, you know, Mr. Carter, so I think I need say no more on that point. They are from this time on forever free from the machinations of Dazaar.

"My apparent enmity of you, sir, originated from no cause save the one of your own abilities as a detective and as a man. When I stated a moment since that I admired you, I spoke truly, for you have my sincere admiration. You possess all the qualities which men should admire—those qualities of the heart and spirit which all the wisdom in the world cannot command, and which belong only to those who have dared to live the sort of life you have, of uprightness, honesty, truth and fearlessness."

"Never mind all that," said Nick.

"But I do mind it, Mr. Carter. More than that, with all my fund of wisdom, which is the product of many centuries, you have proven yourself wiser than I—wiser and better, and infinitely greater, for you have bested me in this warfare between us, which I invited and which I sought. The proof of that is that I am sitting here before you, uttering my last confession like any ordinary criminal who sees relentless death staring him or her in the face. We have played the game and you have won; and you have won, sir, because, although I am still Dazaar, yet I am a woman, and I have a woman's heart.

"It is that woman's heart, keeping the life in this body in order, that I might continue to exist, that has been and is my undoing, and the strange part of it all is that now that the crucial moment has arrived, I am not sorry. I do not regret that I am a woman. I do not regret that you have been the victor. I do not regret that my ultimate end is near. I do not regret that this man beside me is dead, for I know that I must

die, and I am still so despicable that I should not have wanted him to live after me. I regret nothing, save that I might not have had his love, and perhaps the opportunity to have existed in goodness for a time, for that, too, is a degree of knowledge that I have never attained. Can you tell me why I have no regrets? I who have been, always, a devil incarnate? Is it because I have a woman's heart in my body? It must be that. Ay, it must be that."

CHAPTER X.

THE CONFESSIONS CONTINUED — THE LAST OF THE SEVEN.

Never, perhaps, in the history of criminology has there been such a story related as the one to which the inspector and Nick Carter listened that night while they sat in the room with the corpse of Thomas Chelsea in the chair near the window, reclining there in such a natural position that it seemed almost as if he were also an attentive listener.

And not the strangest part of it was the effect that the relator of it had upon them.

The reader must remember that it was a beautiful woman who related the unbelievable incidents and conditions to them, and that she sat there before them during the entire time she talked, with the hand of the dead man held firmly within her own.

But so graphic did she become as she proceeded with her tale, that the room in which they were seated, the corpse who seemed to be their guest—ay, the beautiful woman herself seemed to fade out of existence, and in their imaginations they were transported to the mountain fastnesses of Upper Thibet to the land of mystery and terror into which, during the twenty centuries of the Christian era, the foot of so-called civilized man has not ventured to tread.

And although, as has already appeared, she told them of things and circumstances, of customs and practices that were utterly outside the realm of human acceptance and belief, yet she related them all in such a simple and straightforward manner and with such an appearance of sincerity and truth, that they found themselves, in spite of their judgments to the contrary, hanging upon her words, and, for the time being, at least, entering into the spirit if not the reality of belief.

"You have been told," she continued, presently, "that there were seven devils in my company of followers, and in a sense that is true. I explain it to you in this way.

"When, having adopted the guise of a woman—and I pray that you will not forget that I am, indeed, a woman, although I have the spirit of a man—I was ostracised from the association of my fellow priests in the temples of Thibet, I had in my company, as every priest of the inner temple of Thibet has, five followers. Those five followers are adepts who have voluntarily forsaken their identities in order to acquire the secrets of priesthood. In doing that they resign all rights which human beings are supposed to possess in their own lives and existences, and they pledge their lives and souls to the priest in whose following they enlist. They become as utterly the property of the man under whom they enlist, as if they were dogs and were chained to him. He can do with them as he pleases, and if one of them annoys him or disobeys him, he can put the disobedient one to death without question; and if he does kill one or more of his followers, there are always others who are eager to enlist, for in the enlistment there is always the promise of future greatness in the possible promise that one of them may be found worthy to be made a priest, and so have permission from the ruler of the universe to live on forever to the length of his will, after the manner and practices I have described. When I tell you that there is rarely one who is accepted out of fifty who make the attempt, you will

understand how hopeless is the hope each one may have of being finally chosen when he enlists.

"Very well, then; I have told you that there are five, and you have been told that there were seven. That is true, for the reason that when I left Thibet I added two to the number of my followers. One of those two was Gracchi, who committed suicide in the cell, and the other is Cortez, who will wish, before the sun rises, that he had committed the same deed before he came to this room at my request, or rather at my command, to rescue me.

"Gracchi was a Hindu; Cortez is a Spaniard; and of all that seven who have followed me and partaken of my fortunes and cruelties, Cortez alone remains.

"He is the last of the seven.

"Perhaps there is another thing which I should explain. I refer to my passion for torturing human beings.

"There is really only one explanation for it, and that is this: When the spirit lives on and on in the flesh instead of going the way the Creator intended; when the spirit prefers material things to the spiritual life and immortality, which is the true destiny of the human soul, that spark of it which we call goodness becomes feebler with time and at last dies out altogether, and every passion and craving to which the human body is heir becomes satiated and inactive. Something is necessary to fill that void, and the only longing which remains forever unsatisfied, is the purely animal love of cruelty; and after a time, even the fondness for witnessing suffering passes away, unless new and hitherto unpracticed methods of inflicting injury upon another can be invented.

"Having become a woman, naturally there were times when I abhorred the practices of cruelty; and yet there were times when the old spirit of the fiend took possession of me, and then nothing would satisfy my longing or satiate my appetite for suffering save to witness the outward evidences of intensest agony as depicted upon the features of a fellow human being. For that reason I invented the maiden of steel, and for that same reason I have invented hundreds of other methods of torture, too frightful to relate to you. Not, I beg you to understand, because of a love for what you would call wickedness, but for the genuine love of torture, just as the periodical drunkard will begin his spree, knowing when he begins it what the end will be, and knowing that he is committing a sin against himself that is far greater and more terrible than any he could inflict upon another.

"And that, gentlemen, is the source and reason for the existence of Devil Worshipers.

"Devil worship is only another name for a process by which the priests of Thibet secure recruits for their hellish practices, and whoever goes into devil worship is going to certain death and certain torture. They are compelled to become what Gracchi and Cortez became—slaves.

"This man here, whose dead hand I hold, you would ask if the same fate were intended for him? No.

"In him I discovered for the first time in my centuries of existence another human being whom I could love better than myself. In him I thought I had discovered a way out of the tangle of a thousand years. In him I dreamed that I could regenerate my soul as I have so often taken to myself a new body, and I hoped that it might be possible for me to get away from the practices of a hundred lifetimes and to forget all that was passed in a present happiness. I believed that with him I could live a few years of real happiness, and after it was over, permit myself to die out of existence as other people die, and so bring to an end the hideous orgies of my endless and wicked life.

"But it was not to be. Nevertheless there is this much that has been accomplished: I have been taught, by this woman's heart that beats within me, and by the

love that it has felt for this man who is now dead, that there is such a thing as goodness. In acquiring that much knowledge I have learned much, and now, when the time comes, I will be glad to die.

"Charge me, then, when you come to try me before your legal tribunal, with whatsoever crime you please, for which the penalty is death, and I will confess that crime. I will admit my guilt, and I will meet death with a smile of gladness, and if you make me suffer, so much the better.

"I have done, gentlemen, for I told you all that you need to know."

* * * * * * *

Scarcely was the story of Irma Plavatski, the Dazaar of Thibet, completed, when the electric bell sounded an alarm, and a moment later Buck Granger, escorted by Patsy, entered the room.

The tall Westerner still walked as one in a dream, as one who has become a somnambulist.

When he entered the room where the inspector, Irma and Nick were gathered, he strode straight across it to Irma and stood before her like a statue, as he had done before his departure.

She did not even glance at him at first, but turned her eyes expectantly to Patsy.

"Well?" she said. "What has happened, boy?"

"Nothing has happened, and I am not a boy."

Patsy turned his back upon her and addressed Nick.

"Mrs. Carter is safe at home," he said. "She is uninjured, and she was not greatly frightened, for she said that she knew you would come soon and rescue her. Also, I was to tell you that she has been treated with as perfect courtesy as could be given her by one who took her away from her home by force."

"You will begin to believe me now, Mr. Carter," said Irma. "Now, I will restore Buck Granger to his right mind, but let me advise that you do not tell him, now or ever, of the expedition he has been on, for he will remember nothing of what has happened, and to be told of it will only serve to disquiet his mind."

Again she bared his arm, and assuming exactly the same position as that which had obtained before she hypnotized him, she stood silently watching him until he opened his eyes in full possession of his senses.

"Tell me, Buck Granger," she said, still retaining her hold upon his arm, "of what you have dreamed since you have been standing here."

"Well, by thunder!" he exclaimed, "if that isn't the queerest thing I ever heard of. I dreamed, madam, that I saw you and Tom sitting on the doorstep of our old cabin in New Mexico. Your arms were around each other and you seemed to be talking, but I couldn't for the life of me hear what you were saying, although I listened for a long time."

The woman looked up into Buck's eyes and smiled. Then, with intense sadness in her voice, she said:

"Out of the black shadows of all my sins, you have brought me a ray of the sunlight of hope."

* * * * * * *

The bronze clock on the mantel in the parlor of Thomas Chelsea's apartments was in the midst of its work of chiming the hour of five, when the door which communicated with the outer hallway swung slowly ajar.

The lights in the parlor had been extinguished, and the room was in utter darkness.

Through a crack between the door and the casing, a faint glimmer of light from the room where Irma Plavatski was sitting beside her dead, appeared, and in the hallway, outside the door that had just swung open, there was another light so that the forms that appeared in the aperture were discernible.

To Nick Carter, the inspector, and five of the inspector's men who were waiting, concealed within the room, those forms were distinctly outlined, and it was

not difficult to identify Murillo Cortez as the man who led them.

He hesitated upon the threshold for an instant, and then advanced with stealthy tread to the center of the room, the others following, so that in another moment they were all within the room, and there were five of them altogether.

No sooner were they safely within the room than Nick, who was all prepared for the attack, raised himself from behind the chair where he was concealed, and he was in the very act of leaping forward and throwing himself upon the tall Spaniard—indeed, he had advanced one foot in preparation for the spring—when he was surprised to see still another form make its appearance at the doorway.

He had gone too far to stop them, however, and so uttering a quick command to his companions, he leaped forward, threw himself upon Cortez, and with him fell to the floor, Cortez underneath, himself on top.

And then, strangely enough, all became a blank.

Even Nick Carter remembered nothing more until he opened his eyes to find Ten-Ichi bending over him, to find the room brilliantly alight, and to see, stretched around him in various attitudes of unconsciousness, the forms of not only the men who had come there to rescue Irma Plavatski, but of his friends and companions as well.

"Cortez left his bag of polpa-powder at the house," said Ten-Ichi, hastily. "I have the antidote with me, and so I revived you quickly. The others will sleep ten minutes yet, and will be none the worse for their experience."

"Ten-Ichi," said Nick, smiling, and getting upon his feet, "I am afraid you have spoiled a very good fight; but come, we will bind these fellows and revive the others. Whether you have saved a life or two, or not, I cannot say, but it is pretty certain that you have saved a lot of bric-â-brac from destruction."

When the inspector, Patsy, Buck and the others opened their eyes to consciousness, Cortez and his followers were already bound and helpless; and ten minutes later they were on their way to the nearest station house for safe-keeping till later in the day.

In the other room Irma had not forsaken her watch beside the dead, and she seemed oblivious to all that had taken place. From that time on, indeed, it was noticeable that she never uttered a word, save to reply to a question that was addressed to her, and so in silence she ultimately met her fate.

When Ten-Ichi was asked how he happened to be there at the moment he did appear, he explained that he had just succeeded in locating the house to which Ethel had been taken, when Patsy and Buck made their appearance. Realizing that something unusual was taking place, he had watched them, and so witnessed the rescue of Ethel. Then, later, he had taken the trail of Cortez and followed him to the Drury Arms apartments.

With the trial, conviction and execution of Cortez, the last of the Seven paid the penalty of his misdeeds. Of Irma Plavatski herself, it may be said that she came to a natural death, for on the morning of her day of execution, she was found lifeless when her jailors went to take her to the chair.

And so ends the history of perhaps one of the most amazing episodes of Nick Carter's career

THE END.

The next issue of the Nick Carter Weekly, No. 378, will be entitled "Ten-Ichi, the Wonderful; or, Nick Carter's Greatest Find," and it will deal almost entirely with an adventure in which the young Japanese assistant to the great detective was almost alone and unaided in some especial work which Nick Carter directed him to do. It will show how the Jap treated a band of youthful crooks—boys who were just setting out on a career of burglary.

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